

Where are all the women?

By Joanne Pontée, Marketing Manager, PDMS

I read an article this week that claimed that female representation in the IT industry in the UK has dropped from more than one quarter of the workforce in 1997 to barely one fifth by 2004. The article then went on to say that the lack of flexible working is the biggest of several reasons why women are shying away from a career in IT. A recent survey by the UK's Department of Trade and Industry backs this up with a survey of 42 women in senior IT roles finding that the majority were considering leaving because they were unable to meet both work and family commitments. Reflecting on this, it seems particularly ironic that an industry that has helped millions of people achieve flexible working, by developing innovative new technologies, is unable to help itself.

So what do we mean by flexible working? In simple terms it relates to flexibility in terms of both time and location. For example, term time working, where a worker remains on a permanent contract but can take paid/unpaid leave during school holidays or working from home. It is the latter where technology is the key enabler. The growth of domestic broadband connectivity, the emergence of IP technology and WiFi have made the transition from office to the home easier and smoother.

The benefits of flexible working to the employee are obvious; allowing them to achieve a better balance between life and work. This is particularly relevant in the case of women with a family, but also applies equally to men who are increasingly looking for more ability to balance work and home. But what of the business benefits? There can be direct cost savings such as a reduction in overheads when employees work from home, but the real benefits undoubtedly come from 'softer' factors, including increased morale, reduction in absenteeism, greater continuity of staff, the ability to attract a higher level of skills and improved customer service.

Where the IT sector is not alone is that the issue of flexible working practices, or rather lack of them, is more apparent in small and medium sized companies. The majority of the largest companies, the multinationals and plcs, have embraced flexible working practices and have found that it not only benefits their employees but also their profit margins. For example, BT introduced a flexible working programme six years ago, about 9,500 of their staff are now employed to work primarily from home and more than 63,000 others are able to work independently, from any location, at any time. The company estimates that it saves them £450 million annually on property costs, absenteeism has fallen by 63% and staff retention has dramatically increased. Obviously BT are a huge organisation with serious financial muscle, but the overall business benefits of flexible working can be achieved by companies of any size.

So if employers recognise that flexible working could make their staff more productive, more motivated and less stressed, why are they not actively pursuing flexible working? A recent study of 418 human resource managers in small to medium sized IT companies revealed that many senior managers held the belief that flexible working practices went against the business culture. In addition, many were concerned about the difficulties of monitoring remote staff as

many managers still feel that they have to oversee staff physically. Surprisingly for the IT industry, a lack of investment in technology to allow remote working is also one of the reasons why many small to medium sized companies have not yet adopted flexible working practices.

If the IT sector is to attract and retain more women, which it must do in order to remain competitive, then it must actively embrace flexible working. This is even more imperative for small to medium sized companies who are competing against the larger organisations for the best skills. This could be said to apply in even greater measure to Isle of Man based companies, whichever sector they operate in, as finding and keeping skilled and experience staff can be difficult.

I'm pleased to say that PDMS is bucking the trend; over a quarter of the workforce are women, many with considerable skills and experience in the IT sector. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly the company's positive attitude towards flexible working. As a mother of a toddler, flexible working has allowed me to continue working in a job that I enjoy, whilst also being able to spend valuable time with my family.

With technology readily available to support flexible working and evidence to suggest that it benefits both the employee and their staff, hopefully in the not to distant future most employees will actively embrace the concept. The IT sector needs to act faster than most, not only to retain, but also attract more women into the industry. An all male IT industry - now that is a frightening thought!